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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NASSAU 000243

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SUBJECT: U.S. JOURNALISTS' ALTERCATION AT DETENTION
FACILITY SPARKS REACTION FROM CUBAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY

Classified By: CDA Brent Hardt, Reasons 1.4 b and d

1. (C) SUMMARY: A Miami-based reporter from Univision suffered injuries to the head after an altercation February 7 with guards at the Immigration Detention Center in Nassau. The incident sparked protests at the Bahamian Consulate in Miami and has prompted several Cuban exile groups to call for a boycott of tourism to The Bahamas. Multiple violent incidents have taken place at the Detention Center and Her Majesty's Prison in recent years. The Bahamian Government has promised to investigate the attack on the U.S. journalist, and has requested FBI assistance, suggesting they are taking the investigation seriously. END SUMMARY.

Univision Journalist Injured in Altercation

2. (C) A group of Miami-based journalists, including reporters and camera crews from Univision 23 and Telemundo 51, were involved in an incident that turned violent at the Carmichael Road Immigration Detention Center in Nassau on February 7. The journalists had accompanied family members of the eight surviving Cuban migrants who were detained at the center after being picked up on Cay Sal Bank in The Bahamas on February 3 (six additional migrants reportedly died en route before the group was discovered). When the Royal Bahamas Defense Force (RBDF) guards that provide security at the Detention Center attempted to forcibly stop the crews from filming, a scuffle broke out and one reporter, Mario Vallejo of Univision, suffered cuts and injuries to the head. Vallejo was discharged after receiving stitches above his left eye at a local hospital and returned to Miami the evening of February 7. Several other journalists were taken to a local police station and released without charge approximately one hour later. The Embassy was able to verify the welfare and whereabouts of all of the journalists on February 7. All have returned to Miami.

3. (C) The Bahamian Ministry of Labour and Immigration called the initial reports "troubling" and promised a full and thorough investigation. The Bahamian Consul in Miami, however, has stated she believed the press reports were erroneous and emphasized that the immigration officials were "trained to act within the law." In a private conversation with the Charge d'Affaires, the Permanent Secretary at the MFA (number-two position in the ministry) also suggested the initial media reports may not be completely accurate. She noted that one unconfirmed Bahamian account suggested that the reporter had "suffered some sort of seizure and fallen down." The reporter himself in a Miami TV interview said he was pushed down and his head was forcibly smashed against a car.

Immediate Response

4. (C) Ambassador Rood received a written inquiry regarding the incident from U.S. Representatives Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Lincoln Diaz-Balart and Mario Diaz-Balart via fax on February 17. The letter has been forwarded to Washington for response. Representative Ros-Lehtinen released the text of the letter to the Bahamian media and it has garnered wide coverage.

5. (C) Cuban-Americans protested at the Bahamian Consulate in Miami on February 8 and 9, and a Miami woman was taken into custody after phoning in a bomb threat to the consulate. Several Cuban exile groups, including Democracy Movement, Agenda Cuba and the Cuban Liberty Council, on February 8 called for a boycott of all tourism to The Bahamas. The Latin Builders Association -- with 750 corporate members -- has reportedly suspended its planned retreat in The Bahamas.

COMMENT: Detention Center a Persistent Problem

6. (C) The February 7 scuffle is the latest in a series of incidents involving the Detention Center and Her Majesty's Prison. Detainees complained of abuse and poor treatment in October 2004, including beatings. After an internal investigation by the Ministry of Labour and Immigration reported no mistreatment, a group of detainees caused a disturbance in December 2004 which injured several guards and

destroyed a dormitory. In 2005 reports of beatings led to several officers being reassigned from the Detention Center to other duties.

17. (C) The Detention Center is plagued by a lack of management and poor morale. Its nominal administrator, Edwin Culmer, was given the job in 2005 after being de facto fired from his position running Her Majesty's Prison. He has publicly complained about having no mandate or instructions and, according to Detention Center officials, is rarely at the facility. The RBDF guards working at the Detention Center often resent the assignment, which they do not see as rewarding or career-enhancing. The lack of attention and resources -- the dormitory destroyed more than one year ago has not been replaced and its charred remains are still on site -- create a hostile environment which has regularly bubbled over into violence.

18. (C) The GCOB is feeling mounting pressure from this incident and its continued detention of two Cuban doctors who Castro had denied the ability to emigrate in 2002 and who subsequently were picked up in Bahamian waters fleeing Cuba. The threat of a tourism boycott has already evoked a cautionary response from the head of the local hotel association. The Foreign Minister has assured the Charge that the Government is taking the incident seriously and will conduct a thorough investigation. The February 10 request for FBI assistance suggests the Government intends to follow through on this commitment.

HARDT